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# **"IF YOU BUILD THEM UP, THEY WILL STAY": THE ROLE OF RECOGNITION AND FEEDBACK ON STUDENT RETENTION**

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**While such stratagems are certainly well founded, and have achieved varying degrees of success, it may be that a more fundamentally vital area of examination is being largely overlooked, namely the impact of the high school experience.**

One of the critical problems facing many institutions of higher learning is that of student retention. While this issue is an important one to address across the entire student population, it has become particularly acute as relates to "minority" pupils. Accordingly, many colleges and universities have developed strategies to try to arrest enrollment attrition. These strategies typically include such mechanisms as tracking programs, "buddy systems", use of mentors, and so forth. While such stratagems are certainly well founded, and have achieved varying degrees of success, it may be that a more fundamentally vital area of examination is being largely overlooked, namely the impact of the high school experience.

Just as a horticulturist would not disregard the role of proper nutrients and soil condition in transforming a seedling into a thriving plant, it would seem that the significance of the "feeder system" for college students would be apparent. However, when addressing problems concerning education, the "illness" model of evaluation often holds sway. This model centers on determining what is "wrong" with students who don't succeed. As typified by such research endeavors as Jonathan Kozol's *Savage Inequalities*, the illness model's focal point is on the characteristics of "at-risk" students, where one of the things at risk is continued attendance in school. Markers of these children frequently include demographic statistics such as lesser family income, low birth weight, absence of two parents in the home, and so on. Decreased school system funding and inferior teacher training are two of the markers that commonly comprise environmental risk factors. The review that follows is not intended to refute the concept of analyzing predictors of negative performance. Rather, the goal here is to encourage greater utilization of a "wellness" model of evaluation. That is, if we study particular characteristics of pupils who "fail" in order to determine "what went wrong", there should be a parallel set of determinants of "what went right" for successful students. The study outlined below is part of an ongoing attempt to identify those determinants.

Beginning in 1994, a renowned research and consulting firm (for proprietary reasons, hereafter referred to as RCF, Inc.) trained teachers at a large urban high school in the mid-western United States in the use of a questionnaire designed to assess personality characteristics of youth (hereafter referred to as the PCQ). The school's enrollment is predominantly "minority." The 80-item questionnaire measures 16 distinct patterns of thought, feeling, and/or behavior by which young people have been found to vary. Respondents' answers to the questionnaire items are coded as either being "predictive" or

"non-predictive" of the pattern being-measured. Examples of these patterns include such things as ability to defer present gratification to a future time; ability to relate positively with teachers, parents, and other adults; and, ability to select out and respond to the positive features of one's social or physical environment. Consistent with the use of the word "ability" in these pattern descriptions, RCF, Inc. refers to a highly predictive pattern as a "talent" (notice the contrast between illness model/"at risk" and wellness model/"talent"). The teacher training involved learning how to administer, score, and give feedback on the PCQ. The research questions of interest were:

- 1) Is there a statistically significant relationship between talent patterns and student outcomes?
- 2) Is there a significantly significant difference between outcomes for students who were answered the PCQ and given feedback on it and those who did not answer the PCQ?

The student outcomes examined included grade point average (GPA), number of times tardy, and number of days absent. The participant group for the study was the incoming freshman cohorts for the 1994, 1995, and 1996 academic years. Over that time span, 699 students answered the PCQ and were given feedback on it; 742 students did not answer the PCQ. The three outcome variables were measured at the first grade reporting date in each of the three years. Quantitative analyses of the data indicated that all 16 of the talent patterns were significantly beneficially related to GPA, i.e., "predictiveness" in each talent pattern was associated with higher obtained grades for the reporting period ( $p < .05$ ). Predictiveness in fifteen of the talent patterns was associated with a reduction in days absent, while 10 of 15 correlated beneficially with number of times tardy. In addition, the group of students who answered the PCQ (and received feedback on it) had statistically significantly better results in terms of higher GPA, fewer times tardy, and fewer days absent than the group who did not answer the questionnaire. Thus, there was strong support for both the hypotheses in question.

The results of the study described above lead to some interesting speculation. For one, if we are to believe researchers of human behavior, people will tend to persist in activities in which they achieve success and avoid those activities that lead to failure. Based on the findings relative to GPA in the study cited, it would not be surprising to find that those students with poorer GPA's would be at greater risk of discontinuing school attendance. Put in other words, those would have a lesser probability of being retained (as, indeed, the tardiness and absenteeism results appear to confirm). However, with the application of the "wellness model", there is a greater opportunity to not only intervene on the behalf of those lacking the positive predictors of success, but to also nurture the growth of those who do. And the reinforcement of success in high school, and ideally at much younger ages, would presumably enhance the chances of positive outcomes and increased retention after college matriculation.

The differences in outcomes based on answering the PCQ also bears further scrutiny. One can only wonder what the "talent level" was of the students who did not respond to the questionnaire. It is theoretically possible that those students also had "predictive" talent patterns, but were never evaluated. If that were the case, a strong case could be made that

the power of the PCQ feedback itself led to the positive outcomes, either through heightened instrumental knowledge, or via reinforced self-esteem, a la the "Hawthorne effect." In such a scenario, the question becomes, "is unrecognized talent useful to anyone?" In any event, results such as the ones cited above make it imperative that those truly interested in the academic welfare of our youth continue to seek answers to previously unasked questions. To do otherwise only lends credence to Browning's admonition that "ignorance is not innocence, but sin."

**Presenter:**

**James R. Jones, Ph.D.** is an Assistant Professor of Management at the University of Nebraska at Omaha. He received his doctorate in Business from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, and also holds Bachelor of Science in Business Administration and Master of Business Administration degrees from the University of Nebraska at Omaha. Dr. Jones's business experience includes 10 years as a human resources professional and consultant at Baker's Supermarkets in Omaha, NE and the Gallup Organization in Lincoln, NE. His research interests include studying the effects of workplace demands on employees, individual differences, ethics, and feedback-seeking behavior. Dr. Jones has been a presenter at several regional and national conferences, and his research has appeared in such publications as the Journal of Applied Psychology and the Journal of Organizational Behavior.